

GOR HOVHANNISYAN

TURKEY'S EXPANSION IN EASTERN AFRICA: THE CASE OF SOMALIA

Abstract: *The paper analyzes Turkish involvement in Eastern Africa by the case of Turkey-Somalia relations. The article represents how Turkey successfully went from providing humanitarian aid to taking control over the important infrastructures and locating own military base in Somalia. The research shows that the Turkish involvement in Somalia is mainly benefiting Turkey rather than Somalia, which does not possess enough resources to speak on equal terms with Turkey. The conclusions drawn from the research are the following: 1) Africa's role as a political theatre is gradually increasing, as more and more players are getting involved, 2) Turkey is getting actively engaged in Africa on its way to becoming a regional power, 3) The case of Turkish involvement in Somalia represents a "Turkish model" that can be offered to struggling states of Africa, i.e. large economic and political involvement in exchange for communication and military infrastructure 4) Somalia's case can become a motivation for other unstable countries in the region in search for a patron state.*

Keywords: Turkey, Somalia, Africa, Horn of Africa, Turkish Foreign Policy, World is bigger than five.

Introduction

In last two decades, Africa, with its natural resources, quickly growing population, and open markets, has become a stage for many countries seeking political influence and economic expansion. In the last years, Africa has become a continent, where new powers such as China, Turkey, India, and the Gulf States are trying to challenge the traditional Western players of the region. Some of these new forces are attempting to establish relationships based on shared ideals, history, faith, and geography while offering new types of economic, political, and even military support. A good example of the aforementioned is Turkey, which is getting actively involved in the continent since 1998, when it adopted the "Africa Action Plan".

Ever since the Justice and Development Party came to power in 2002, Africa's significance for Turkish foreign policy increased drastically. Later in the late 2000s Turkish government under the leadership of Erdoğan adopted a more ambitious foreign policy, which by some is characterized as "neo-ottomanism", a concept which promotes the Ottoman past to be more politically involved in territories that were once under the sovereignty of the Ottoman Empire. The ideology is reflected in various aspects of Turkish politics. Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is a vocal proponent of the concept and frequently uses the term "Osmanlı Torunu" (descendant of the Ottomans) to describe modern day Turks (President Erdogan

“Don’t these need an Ottoman slap?” 2013). In the last 20 years, Turkey is successfully paving its way to an economic, political, and even military presence in various former Ottoman territories in the Middle East, the Balkans and Africa.

Since 2002, Turkey's presence in Africa has grown significantly, with the number of embassies expanding from 12 to 43 as of April 2022, and trade volume greatly increasing from \$5.4 billion in 2002 to \$26 billion in 2021 (Orakçi 2022). Turkish NGOs and official institutions are also active on the continent, including the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA), the Yunus Emre Institute, and the Turkish Maarif Foundation. Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has visited 33 of Africa's 54 countries, the most recent visit carried out in February 2022 (Gülşen 2022). Turkey maintains military presence in Mali, the Central African Republic, Libya, and Somalia, the first two as part of UN Peacekeeping mission. In Libya, Turkey has been directly involved in the civil war, deploying not only Turkish Armed Forces, but also Turkish-backed mercenaries from the Middle East.

The most active zone of Turkish involvement in Africa is the Horn of Africa Peninsula, also known as Somali Peninsula, which is composed of four countries: Eritrea, Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Somalia. It has a strategic location, is situated near major sea trade lines, and borders Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. Because of the maritime traffic, large ports, huge surrounding wealth, weapons trade, commerce crossing points, and the perils of piracy, the area has constantly been a hotspot for major powers. The political instability and continuous conflicts in the region are creating opportunities for involvement and power projection, which is the cornerstone of Turkish engagement in the area.

Turkey is also widely using anti-imperialist slogans to appeal to the region, actively promoting its “the world is bigger than five” motto in Africa as a tool for further involvement. “The world is bigger than five” is a political doctrine first voiced by Turkish leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan back in 2013 (Erbay 2020). It refers to the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, taking their veto right as the main target of the doctrine. Erdoğan describes the veto right as “veto threat”, claiming that the five countries use it for personal interests and veto resolutions concerning key topics. He holds that such state of affairs is unfair and deactivates the organization. Apart from voicing the doctrine in various platforms, Turkish leader went further and published a book titled “A Fairer World is Possible” in September 2021, where he heavily criticizes the UN and offers a reform to make it “more effective and fairer” (Erdoğan 2021). The doctrine is gradually becoming increasingly popular in Turkish leadership’s political lexicon, becoming more appealing to those governments who may feel left out of the general decision-making process.

Turkey's Involvement in Somalia: Investing in the Infrastructure

The most active zone of Turkish involvement in Africa is the Horn of Africa Peninsula, more specifically The country is in a state of civil war since 1991 and has a semi-autonomous (Puntland) and a de facto independent republic (Somaliland) within its internationally recognized territories. Somalia also battles the al-Shabaab, an al-Qaeda affiliated terrorist group based in Somalia.

The beginning of contemporary Turkey-Somalia relations can be traced back to 1979, when Turkey opened an embassy in Mogadishu, only to be forced to close it down in 1991, when Somalia's civil war started, igniting a situation that is yet to be resolved. During the transitional government period in Somalia, Turkey's Prime Minister Erdoğan and the late Somali President Abdullahi Yusuf Ahmed met during Africa Union (AU) summit in Ethiopia in January 2007, when Erdoğan encouraged his Somali colleague to present the government's needs to Ankara (International Crisis Group). Nevertheless, the offer was neither denied nor accepted. We can assume that the goal to secure a presence in the Horn of Africa region was already on the list for Turkey at that time, but an appropriate occasion and a cause were necessary not to be seen as foreign occupying force.

The 2011 Somalia Famine, a humanitarian catastrophe that caused the death of almost 260.000 people received special attention from Turkey, creating the desired occasion and the cause mentioned earlier. On 19 August 2011, during the holy month of Ramadan, a 200-person Turkish delegation led by Prime Minister Erdoğan and his family visited Mogadishu, the capital city of Somalia. He became the first non-African leader to visit Somali since 1993. The delegation also brought humanitarian aid, marking the beginning of Turkish "Humanitarian diplomacy" towards Somalia. Shortly after, Turkey reopened its embassy in Mogadishu, which had not been operating for around 20 years.

A week after Erdoğan's visit, an aid campaign was launched in Turkey which raised more than 200 million US dollars (Turkey raises \$201 million for Somalia 2011). During August and September, several Turkish ships arrived at the Mogadishu port bringing more than 10,000 tons of humanitarian aid (Kabakli 2011). In September 2011, Prime Minister Erdoğan addressed the issue at the 66th General Assembly of the United Nations. He dedicated a significant part of his speech to Somalia and accused the UN of "being helpless in the face of today's problems" (United Nations General Assembly 2011).

In March 2012, Turkish Airlines started regular flights to Mogadishu, becoming the first major commercial airline to land in Mogadishu in more than 20 years. Among the passengers of the first flight was the then Deputy Prime Minister of Turkey Bekir Bozdağ (Somalia: Turkish Airlines begins flights to Mogadishu 2012).

Since 2013, Turkey has started investing in Somalia's infrastructure, laying the

groundwork for future engagement. In January 2013, Favori LLC, a Kozuva Group company, announced plans to renovate and build a new Aden Adde International Airport facility in Mogadishu, as well as modernize other existing service facilities. The airport's existing 15-plane capacity, according to plan, had to be increased to 60 with a \$10 million renovation (A Turkish company will build an airport for Somalia 2013). On June 30, 2013, Favori LLC and Somalia's Ministry of Information, Post, Telecommunication, and Transportation agreed to rehabilitate the airport and oversee its day-to-day operations for 15 years (Financial Governance Committee of Somalia 2016).

In January 2015, Turkish president Erdoğan opened a new terminal at the Aden Adde International Airport with the Somalian president Hassan Sheikh Mohamud. Erdoğan also dedicated the Somalia-Turkey Training and Research Hospital (previously known as Digfer Hospital), a 200-bed medical facility with a \$ 135.7 million operational budget during his visit (Karyağdı, Güder 2015). The hospital was concurrently renamed ‘‘Erdoğan hospital’’ (Weekly Press Conference on the Progress of the Government 2015). The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency is working closely with the hospital to provide training programs for Somali experts, such as the "Allied Health Professionals Training Program Project" (TİKA Trains Allied Health Professionals in Somalia 2021).

Apart from the airport, Turkey is also in control of the operations of the Mogadishu port. Somalia's government approved Turkish Albayrak Group, a business with close ties to the ruling Justice and Development Party, to run Mogadishu port for a 20-year period on October 27, 2013. Despite the fact that the Somalian Federal Parliament postponed the voting on the transaction in April 2014 (Somalia: Federal Parliament postpones vote on Seaport Management Deal 2014), the government delegated port operations to the Albayrak Group in September. According to the deal, 55 percent of the generated revenue would go to Somalian authorities, while the remaining 45 percent would go to the company (Mogadishu port to Albayrak 2014). The arrangement was renewed in 2020, giving Albayrak Group 14 more years to operate the port (Mogadishu port to Albayrak Group for 14 more years 2020).

In June 2016, the largest Turkish embassy in the world was inaugurated by the Turkish President Erdoğan in Mogadishu. The complex has a territory of over 80.000 square meters and consists of seven buildings. According to the Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, the expanses for the construction of the embassy were \$ 65 million (Tepeli 2016).

In March 2018, Turkey and Somalia signed an agreement to rebuild Somalia's parliament building. The cost of the project was estimated at \$ 60 million. A second agreement was reached between TİKA and the Somali Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation for the repair of a dam and water reservoirs in Middle Shabelle region of

Somalia (Turkey to rebuild Somali parliament 2018).

In January 2020, Turkish president Erdoğan announced that Somalia has invited Turkey to explore for oil in its waters (Erdogan says Somalia invited Turkey to explore for oil offshore 2020), however, no developments have followed as of May 2022.

Aside from investments, Turkey also provides significant donations to Somali, the amount of which exceeds \$ 117 million only in the last six years (Tokyay 2021). The latest donation agreement was signed on 1 July 2021 and entered into force on 4 August 2021. According to the agreement, Turkey provides a \$ 30 million donation to Somali, which will be paid in monthly installments of \$ 2.5 million (Official gazette 2021). In Turkey, the decision was met with major discontent, as at that time Turkey was battling the worst wildfires in its history, with more than 1,700 square kilometers of forest burnt (Akgül 2021) and nine casualties (Ocak 2021). Turkey was unable to handle the fires by itself, as various countries sent airplanes, helicopters, and firefighting personnel to help. The opposition criticized the government's donation decision, saying that the funds could have been used for battling the fires (Tokyay 2021). Such management of funds in such tough time is a perfect demonstration of Somali's political and strategic value for Turkey.

In addition to investments, Turkey is also actively using soft power as a tool for further expansion in the country. Turkey provides scholarships for Somalian students to study in different universities of Turkey. As per the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey, 1092 Somalian students have received Turkish scholarships since 1992, with the number of scholarships for 2019-2020 academic year being 98 (Relations between Turkey and Somalia). Current Minister of Justice of Somali Abdulkadir Mohamed Nur has also benefited from Turkish scholarship programs, graduating from Ankara University, Faculty of Political Sciences (Dhaysane 2022).

Turkiye Diyanet Foundation, a state foundation operating under the Directorate of Religious Affairs, restored and restarted the Sheikh Sufi Imam Hatip High School in Mogadishu in 2012. As of 2018, 500 children are studying in the school, with Turkish language included in the course (Awel 2018).

Besides education, Turkey is also actively using one of the main tools of its soft power – soap operas. According to Al Jazeera, Turkish films have surpassed Hollywood and Bollywood films in Somalia, becoming more popular (Mohamed 2018).

From Investment to Military Cooperation

Apart from humanitarian aid and investments, military cooperation is also an important part of Turkey-Somalia relations. On 13 April 2012, governments of two countries signed a military training cooperation agreement, by which Turkey started

training Somali soldiers and officers (Official Gazette 2012), which they received in various educational facilities of Turkish Armed Forces.

Years of serious investments, considerable humanitarian aid and substantial support produced desirable result. The biggest Turkish overseas military facility in the world, Turksom, was launched in September 2017 by the Prime Minister of Somalia and the Chiefs of General Staff of Turkey and Somalia. The Turksom Military Training Base, located in southern Mogadishu, spans 400 acres, and is able to host up to 1500 trainees at a time. \$50 million was reportedly spent to establish the base [Turkish military base built in Somali was opened! 200 Turkish soldiers will be deployed in the base 2017]. The intergovernmental forces of the base carry the name “African Eagle”. In December 2017, the first batch of 200 troops graduated, signaling the start of the process (Sayraç 2017). As of January 2021, the number of troops trained by Turkey is estimated to be about 2000, according to accessible sources (Nkala 2021).

Apart from Turksom, Somali Special Forces also receive three-month special training at Counter-Terrorism Training and Exercise Center in Isparta, Turkey. It is noteworthy that the training process is fully in Turkish, and prior to the training, soldiers pass an intensive language course. Their training is no different from those of Turkish soldiers. Video published by Turkish state-run TRT Haber shows Somali soldiers performing commands in Turkish and taking the “Commando oath” of the Turkish army. Two main contingents trained by Turkish side are Gorgor (Eagle) elite forces and Haramcad (Cheetah) Police Special Operations Battalion (Nor 2021).

Turkey also provides military equipment to Somalia, such as Turkish MPT-76 assault rifles (Order for mass production of 45,000 Turkish MPT-76 assault rifles 2017) and Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected ‘Kirpi’ military vehicles (Dhaysane 2021). In December 2021, Somali allegedly received its first group of Bayraktar Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV) (Somalia Receives Bayraktar drones from Turkey 2021), which is yet to be confirmed or denied by the authorities as of May 2022.

The Questionable Side of Turkish Involvement in Somalia

Although the self-proclaimed humanitarian mission of Turkey in Somalia was viewed in a highly positive light in 2011, following years have brought a list of justified suspicions and concerns regarding the Turkish involvement in the country. Guled Ahmed from the Middle East Institute states that in Somalia “Turkey has evolved from friend to foe, trade partner to trade protectionist, state builder to outright spoiler.” (Ahmed 2021).

Turkish companies who took over the management of key infrastructures of Somalia via no bid contracts, have been allegedly involved in criminal practices such as bribery, human and labor rights abuse as documented by 2016 U.N. monitoring

report (United Nations Security Council 2016). The companies have also been suspected in artificially inflating their expenses to make more profit for the company itself and less for the state.

Albayrak Group, which is in charge for the operations of Mogadishu port since 2014, announced a 70% salary cut for workers days after taking over the management of the port, causing the workers to protest and voice their concerns. According to Yusuf Warsame Afrah, then the Chairperson Mogadishu Port Workers Union, Albayrak were also “attempting to replace some of the current employees with others hired directly by the company” (Moalim 2014). A major scandal emerged in 2017, when two Turkish managers of the company fled the country after rape allegations by a female employee of the port (Somalia: Two Turkish Bosses Flee Country As Sex Scandal Involving Somali Female Employees Exposed 2017). Nordic Monitor also accused Albayrak of corruption, holding that since the company took over the management of the port, “corruption and bribery have become more widespread, and the port has functioned as the main gate of the corrupt system” (Turkish Embassy in Somalia promotes Erdoğan-allied corrupt business group Albayrak 2019). Albayrak is also allegedly artificially inflating the expenses, reporting \$2.7 million per month in revenue as compared to the \$6 million revenue the port had prior to Albayrak taking over (Ahmed 2021).

Favori LLC, which manages the Mogadishu International Airport since 2013, has reportedly violated its contract by collecting unauthorized payments that should have gone to the Somali Civil Aviation and Meteorology Authority (SCAMA). As per the U.N. report, Favori “is deducting salary taxes as expenses and has also been making use of a depreciation deduction at up to \$300,000 per month” (United Nations Security Council 2016). Furthermore, the company has been accused of continuous violations of human and labor rights. A detailed report made by the Federation of Somali Trade Unions (FESTU) provides numerous examples of rights abuse, such as disregard for national laws, excessive working conditions without compensation, absence of feeding and transport support to workers, deterioration of workers’ health concerns etc. (Favori’s Abundant Abuses: Working in Unsafe and Unfair Conditions 2021). The report also supports the claim that various high-ranking officials of the country are bribed by business class tickets and free holiday opportunities in Turkey in exchange for their non-intervention in the situation.

Another concern regards the trade between countries. Although the bilateral trade between Turkey and Somalia grew along with the political relations, the increase is very much one-sided. In 2010, Somalia exported \$1.36 million in commodities to Turkey in 2010, while importing \$4.8 million (Ahmed 2021), a trade deficit which was controllable. As of 2020, Somalia’s export to Turkey has reached \$4.67 million (“Somalia | Turkey,” Observatory of Economic Complexity), while

Turkish exports skyrocketed, reaching \$264 million (“Turkey| Somalia,” Observatory of Economic Complexity), exceeding the 2010 number by nearly 55 times. It can be inferred that the Somalia-Turkey trade expansion is not two-sided, meaning that the situation is beneficial for only one side, and cannot be counted as a positive development in the bilateral relations.

Another serious problem concerns the military cooperation. Turkey provides Somali army with weapons and ammunition mainly produced by Mechanical and Chemical Industry Corporation (MKEK), a Turkish state-owned entity. The differences between the Turkish ammunition and the traditional ammunition of the Somali National Army (SNA) can create difficulties with integration. For example, Turkish MPT-76 assault rifles come with 7.62×51mm NATO ammunition (Mechanical and Chemical Industry Corporation), while the AK-47, the standard weapon of SNA (Mumin 2022), and comes with 7.62×39mm ammunition (AKM (AK-47) Kalashnikov modernized assault rifle, caliber 7.62mm. Also, by providing Turkish weapons, Turkey creates a new market for MKEK and other companies, thus making SNA always “come back for more”.

Turkish-trained Somali forces, which receive their training in Turkish military traditions and in Turkish language, are becoming bearers of the ideas of Turkish military, becoming a political base for Turkey in Somalia. Although the main purpose of Turkish-trained Somali forces was to fight the al-Shabaab, there are reports claiming that these forces are involved in internal political affairs. In February 2021, Turkish-trained Somali special forces known as Gorgor allegedly attacked civilians who were protesting pro-Turkish President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed’s (also known as Farmaajo) term extension (Sheikh 2021). In the same month, another Turkish-trained unit, Haramcad police forces attacked journalists who were trying to report gunfights in the street (Haramcad police brutally attack journalists covering al-Shabaab attack in Mogadishu 2022). Months later, Haramcad police forces raided Mustaqbal Radio station and confiscated equipment (Mohammed 2021). A May 2021 BBC report also states that Turkish-trained soldiers created a strong polarization in the army, which causes a political and military crisis in the structure (Kasapoğlu 2021).

In January 2019, Nordic Monitor reported that Turkey’s National Intelligence Organization (MIT), allegedly delivered \$600,000 to the al-Shabab terrorist organization in Somalia through a former Gitmo (Guantanamo Bay detention camp) detainee (Bozkurt 2019). Although it is unknown whether the claim is true or not.

Overall, it is safe to claim that Turkish involvement has had a positive effect on its general image, however, it is more of a one-sided deal in Turkish favor, and the price that Somalia is going to pay for the support is yet to be known.

Significance of Somalia for Turkey

Somalia became a stepping stone for Turkish involvement in the Horn of Africa region, creating a base for possible future expansion. It is important to understand, why Somalia is a good option for Turkey, and why Turkey can be a desirable option for local countries in search for a sponsor.

Somalia has a strategic location, bordering the Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Aden and is close to the Middle East, giving Turkey an additional leverage opportunity in the MENA region. Maintaining presence in Somalia is also a tool for Turkey to contain its regional rival Egypt in the continent. Somalia possesses unexplored natural resources, potential exploration of which can change the context drastically. In addition, Somalia is a new market with young population, which provides new opportunities for Turkish entrepreneurs.

Turkey, on its part, is becoming more and more popular in the region for numerous reasons. First, Turkey has a unifying factor with numerous African countries, which most of the other players' lack – Islam. Turkey positions itself as the potential leader of the Islamic world and represents a successful example of combination of Islam and democracy with all its defects notwithstanding. Unlike several other players, Turkey has had historical positive relations with the region. In Somali's case, it is the history of cooperation within the Ottoman Empire and the Adal Sultanate against the Abyssinians and Portuguese back in 16th century. Turkey has a “clean record” in the region and has no colonialist past as compared to the Western European players. They also have a record of successful defenses of its and its allies' political and military interests in the near past effectively promoting it in the international arena. As a final point, Turkey's “World is bigger than five” motto can be appealing to Africa, which is not presented in the UN Security Council.

Conclusion

Turkish involvement in Somalia brings a new “Turkish model”, which may be replicated in other African states with dire social and political conditions. In this model, Turkey offers economic and political support, investments, promotion in the international arena in exchange for communication and military infrastructure. It can be reaffirmed that as Africa becomes a political arena involving traditional, as well as new powers in the region, Turkey is also getting actively engaged, especially in the Horn of Africa region, securing not only political, but also military presence as part of its “neo-ottomanism” ideology. Apart from Middle East and Europe, political, economic, and military expansion to Africa is a sine qua non for Turkey to accomplish its geopolitical ambitions in the MENA region. Having military bases abroad is not only a necessity for geopolitical objectives but is also a matter of international status.

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